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Cormac McCarthy and the Signs of Sacrament: Literature, Theology, and the Moral of Stories, by Matthew L. Potts. NY: BloomsBury Academic, 2015. 232 pages. \$110.00. Hardcover.

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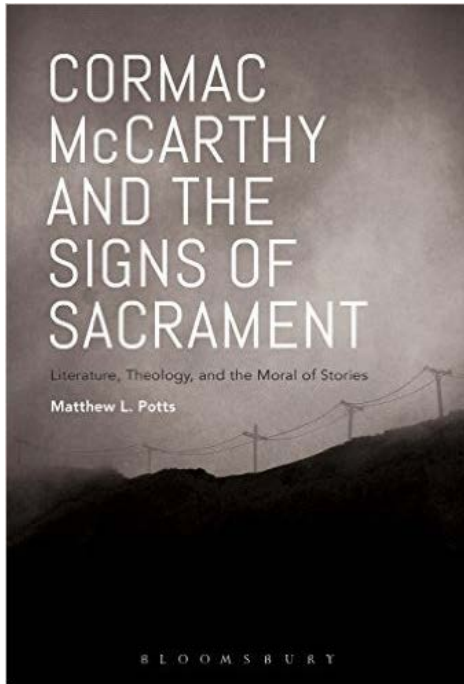
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Cormac McCarthy and the Signs of Sacrament

Literature, Theology, and the Moral of Stories

Matthew L. Potts

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ISBN 9781501306556. For other formats: [Link to Publisher's Website](#). **Review**

To those interested in the dynamic relationship between theology and literature, the work of novelist Cormac McCarthy has long been begging for a sustained critical treatment. With the recent release of Mathew Potts's *Cormac McCarthy and the Signs of Sacrament*, we are treated to such a book—a study that is to be particularly commended for mining the theological content so prevalent in McCarthy's work. By and large, and with some qualification, Pott's beautifully written text makes choice contributions not only to sacramental aesthetics, but to the fields of ethics and narrative theory as well.

Drawing on an impressive scope of (mostly) modern and late modern critics, philosophers, and theologians (from Aquinas to Luther, Nietzsche, Barth, Arendt, and Judith Butler), Potts sets out to propose various ways in which "McCarthy's routine and extensive use of sacramental imagery means to deploy" a precisely "cruciform" logic—a literary enfleshment of Luther's *theologia crucis*—that analogically develops in McCarthy's fiction "a distinct moral vision, a sacramental ethics." Potts tracks sacramental elements and imagery in innovative ways, paying focused attention to how sacramental signs emerge through representative postmodern means and themes: identity, dispossession, agency, and narrative, to name a few.

Clearly, many contemporary critics are interested in sacramental aesthetics as well. Early in the text, Potts engages one such critic, Regina Schwartz, a literary scholar whose recent foray into sacramental poetics seeks to trace divine presence. Schwartz argues that since the time "God left the world" in the Luther-begotten English Renaissance, traces of the sacred have been dislocated from mainly ecclesial settings to primarily aesthetic productions or cultural artifacts. Potts takes aspects of Schwartz's argument to task by beginning a promising consideration of how the tension between consubstantiation and transubstantiation that undergirds this phenomenon might be arrogated in literary spaces, but the conversation is moved aside too quickly. The reader wants more of this kind of thing—particularly the reader for whom the relationship between such doctrinal dynamics mean everything to the development of a theologically-astute literary criticism.

But, as Potts discloses early, he is not on a mission to “enlist” McCarthy as a theologian. However, he is on a mission, at least implicitly, to recover the connection between aesthetics and ethics in the “godspend” worlds that McCarthy renders with such lyrical, God-haunted beauty. As Potts observes, in McCarthy “the sacramental and moral are deeply related,” and Potts’s project is to track this connection in a group of select texts, mainly *Sutree*, *Blood Meridian*, *The Border Trilogy*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road*. Potts’s work is explicitly theological and aims to develop a theology of narrative that is sacramental from the ground up. Following Butler, narrative promotes mutuality and community; narrative “does not ground us in ourselves,” but in others, which is “its primary ethical relevance” (138). However, unlike Butler (who eschews supernatural transcendence), Potts seeks to extend this vision theologically, to a critical account of “God’s signs and wonders,” and to the transcending mysteries implicit in Christian ecclesiology and sacramentality.

However, a critical question also emerges: is the nearness of God implicit in a sacramental imagination actually present in McCarthy’s novels? Does McCarthy’s vision, a vision that has been legitimately characterized as “Gnostic,” make credible space for the theological intimacy and implicit grace proper to sacramentality? The answer, as Potts does well to illustrate, is a qualified “yes,” and the postmodern context out of which McCarthy writes becomes key in this consideration. The abandonment of God, a topic that has preoccupied the literary imagination in writers as disparate as Flannery O’Connor, Kurt Vonnegut, and David Foster Wallace, is also a trademark preoccupation of postmodern theology. But it is sacramentality (focusing as it does on mediation of phenomena through the finite, through the “material turn” of created “bodies”) that is becoming of increasing interest to critics of all stripes. It is in this spirit that Potts tracks the empty spaces—tracks dispossession and abandonment—and the ways that the Christian sacramental tradition, a tradition founded upon the empty space of a tomb and fixed upon transcendent carnality, might credibly respond to and aesthetically represent these phenomena.

Potts is not the first to critically contemplate such an aesthetic, as is claimed; but he is the first to articulate a book-length postmodern sacramentality in McCarthy, a critical contribution that resonates constructively with others in this field and expands the conversation substantially. Still, there is also another kind of an “elephant in the room” in Pott’s text. His “analogical” case for a sacramental vision in McCarthy derives more from Luther’s *theologia crucis* than it does from the *analogia entis*, a normative trajectory central in traditional sacramental theology. Potts neglects this discourse, and the needed distinctions between the “dialectical” (i.e. Protestant) and “analogical” (i.e. Catholic) imaginations that ponder God’s immanence and transcendence—distinctions based largely on competing theories of sacramentality (articulated by David Tracy and others)—are missing. Potts integrates many Catholic interlocutors (Metz, de Certeau, and Chauvet), but his reticence to name such theo-critical approaches as “Catholic” (a word that is sparingly used in the text, if at all) can be viewed as intellectually myopic. It’s not clear whether or not Potts is sidestepping such distinctions in order to cultivate a more integrated Christian ecclesiology, but the gap is conspicuous in its absence and creates a kind of critical fog.

In any case, Potts's *theologia crucis* runs deep. He is particularly adept at articulating how McCarthy works with the corporeal "signs"—works with bodies—and how God-made things, to borrow from Hans Urs von Balthasar "vibrate with a 'mysterious more'." For Potts, McCarthy's theological aesthetic derives precisely from the body—precisely from the finitude of created things—a "transcorporeality" as Graham Ward has it, whom Potts engages. While other readers may not detect anything benign (theologically or otherwise) in McCarthy's dark vision, Potts sees through the blood and dust to the grace that bubbles-up from the "deep glens." Even in violence and ecological degradation, all creation still hums with ancient "mystery," to turn to, as Potts does, McCarthy's rhapsodic apparition that concludes *The Road*. But, for Potts, while the finitude of all things—indeed their "mystery" and their redemption—is reconciled in Christ, we are not quite so sure this is the case for McCarthy. For Potts, there is a decidedly cruciform sign-theory, a sacramental algebra where all things sacrifice meaning "to the signs of the crucified Christ." For McCarthy, the plot is only thickening.

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